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Driscoll, S.T. *Political discourse and the growth of Christian ceremonialism in Pictland, the place of the St Andrews Sarcophagus*. In Foster, S.M. (Eds) *St Andrews Sarcophagus, a Pictish Masterpiece and its International Connections*, pages pp. 168-178. Four Courts Press (1998)

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/3312/>

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The
ST ANDREWS
Sarcophagus

A PICTISH MASTERPIECE AND ITS
INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIONS

Political Discourse and the Growth of Christian Ceremonialism in Pictland: the Place of the St Andrews Sarcophagus

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This volume exists because we are agreed that the St Andrews Sarcophagus occupies a special place in the cultural history of Scotland. The appraisal of its artistic qualities is based upon the extended considerations of generations of scholars. There has been less discussion, however, about how historically significant it might be. For instance, does the exceptional artistic achievement reflect political success? Or does it signify an intellectual transformation? To begin to consider the historical significance of a single object requires that we attempt to reconstitute its social and political context. One means towards understanding this context is an examination of the long-term trends in the exercise of authority in southern Pictland. This general consideration of the archaeology of power will, I hope, help to situate more specific considerations of the Sarcophagus, placing them within the broader political discourse.

The raw material for my discussion is largely archaeological, but is bolstered by a range of historical studies that has appeared in journals and edited collections (especially Crawford 1994; 1996) over the past ten years or so and has shed much new light on 'Dark Age' Pictland. There are three important developments, which I wish to focus on. These are long-term trends which span the 8th and 9th centuries, but for which precise dates do not yet exist. In every case further detailed fieldwork will certainly refine the observations presented here. The first development is the shift away from fortified hilltop residences in preference to apparently unfortified 'palaces'. The second development is the adoption of prehistoric ritual monuments as outdoor ceremonial centres. The third is the change in monumental patronage, which focuses on the embellishment of churches and their immediate surroundings.

It is my contention that all three of these developments reveal aspects of the nature of power in the 8th and 9th centuries and how it was exercised. Archaeology can identify the material qualities of the settings where significant political and social occasions were managed. These considerations are critical, since we are agreed that the Sarcophagus was part of the fabric of just such a powerful setting and its imagery was part of a discourse that was religious while seeking to be authoritative.

¹ For reasons of space, a number of ideas have passed unacknowledged, but I have taken care to cite works which should lead the reader back to detailed arguments and primary sources. I would like to thank Dauvit Broun, Thomas Clancy and Simon Taylor for various general discussions on these matters and especially Katherine Forsyth for guidance on specific points. I am particularly grateful to Sally Foster for inviting me to participate in this important project and for her critical advice.

THE DECLINE OF THE HILLFORTS

The most conspicuous settlements in northern Britain of the 6th and 7th centuries were dry-stone and earthwork fortifications built upon hills and crags. Their archaeology and historical associations are familiar through survey and excavation undertaken throughout this century, especially in the last few decades. Many such sites have royal associations, but as Leslie Alcock has noted it would be unwise to consider all or even most of such hilltop fortifications as having been royal (1988a).

The essential nature of these fortified residences, namely that they were elevated, is signalled in the almost universal toponymic element *dùn*, or variations of it. Architecturally, these small hillforts have their roots in the dry-stone building traditions of the Iron Age. Where they have been excavated as at Dundurn (Alcock, Alcock and Driscoll 1989), Clatchard Craig (Close-Brooks 1986), Dunadd (Lane and Campbell forthcoming), the Mote of Mark (Curle, A.O. 1914) and Dunollie (Alcock and Alcock 1987), they have produced a similar suite of finds which includes two categories of objects which are generally taken to signify high social status: evidence of fine metal-working and imported pottery. Although many of the best studied examples are in the west, this architectural tradition seems well established in the east. Unexcavated Pictish examples which should be included on the basis of the visible remains include Turin Hill, Angus and Moncrieffe Hill, Perthshire (Feachem 1955, 74, 80). The contemporary historical notices of both sites and later medieval status of Forfar and Perth suggest deep royal associations (*ESSH*, 192–5, 223).

The most prominent element of these structures was a massively built dwelling, presumably the lord's residence. The most elaborate of these acquired surrounding defences which in their most complex form created a series of subsidiary enclosed spaces. Visual prominence of the principal dwelling was achieved by utilising the natural topography to create an organic relationship between natural landform and the architectural form. Although frequently these sites are visually striking, significant limitations arise from this reliance on topography. In particular, such sites often were incapable of providing a level stance for a grand and imposing public hall and also may not have provided a stately or impressive approach.

Modern excavations show that many hillforts with royal associations cease to be occupied during the 9th century and look to be abandoned as residences by the 10th. It is uncertain whether two possible exceptions, Dumbarton and Edinburgh, were continuously occupied (Alcock and Alcock 1990; Driscoll and Yeoman 1997). This decline is mirrored by decreasing mention of the hilltop sites in the few contemporary historical sources, which might be expected to notice such sites if they were still politically significant enough to be the subject of military assaults, as they had been earlier. There are a number of reasons why a particular site might be abandoned, but the historical disappearance of a type of site implies a change in the way of life. It requires a general explanation. This suggests that new places were being built where the business of the rich and powerful was conducted.

One way to interpret this shift is as a change in the political importance of fortified hilltops. To understand this it helps to contrast them with the open undefended sites, which seem to have replaced them (Driscoll 1998 forthcoming). Forteviot is absolutely central to our understanding of this process (Alcock 1982; Alcock and Alcock 1992). The conclusions I would offer regarding the architectural shift can be summarised in two points. First, it implies a decrease in the importance of naked military symbolism. Probably it indicates that such fortifications were inadequate protection from the well-organised assaults of large armies, such as that which brought down Dumbarton in 870. Secondly, there seems to be a replacement of indigenous architectural forms with formally set-out rectilinear ones, which are drawn ultimately from Continental traditions.

The importance of this shift for understanding the significance of the Sarcophagus is that it was sculpted around the time of this dramatic reorganisation of the most powerful elements of the settlement system. The changes in the architectural form which accompanied this transformation must have been profound and can be scarcely guessed at. However, such a change in the living circumstances of the most powerful must have influenced the setting and substance of political discourse.

THE RISE OF CEREMONIAL CENTRES

A second broad trend which can be assigned to this period is an increased interest in sites of prehistoric ritual significance. Forteviot is of course the classic example, where the presumed site of a 'palace' occupied from at least the time of Cinaed mac Ailpín is adjacent to a remarkably dense concentration of Neolithic and later monuments (Alcock 1982; Alcock and Alcock 1992). There has been no systematic study of this phenomenon, but it appears to reflect a real interest in these ancient monuments and it is not a mere coincidence (Bradley 1987). The larger prehistoric monuments would have remained prominent features of the landscape and the presence of contemporary burials at some of the ancient sites reused in the Pictish area indicates that the interest was deliberate (Driscoll 1998). Scone provides an important point of comparison with Forteviot, because it too occupies an area which has deep ritual importance as represented by complexes of prehistoric monuments at Blairhall (Fig. 50) and Huntingtower.

It is completely appropriate to compare these sites with the better documented Irish material, especially given the flurry of work which has taken place in the past decade (Warner 1988; Newman 1997; Waterman 1997). Particularly important in this context is Elizabeth FitzPatrick's comprehensive examination of Irish royal inauguration sites (1997) and Cathy Swift's consideration of the legal importance of sites in Meath (1996). These and other studies show a great interest in prehistoric monuments in the early Christian period; they formed a setting for royal ceremonies with non-Christian religious overtones and in some cases provided a focal place for very large public gatherings. It seems entirely likely that these ancient sites were selected for these

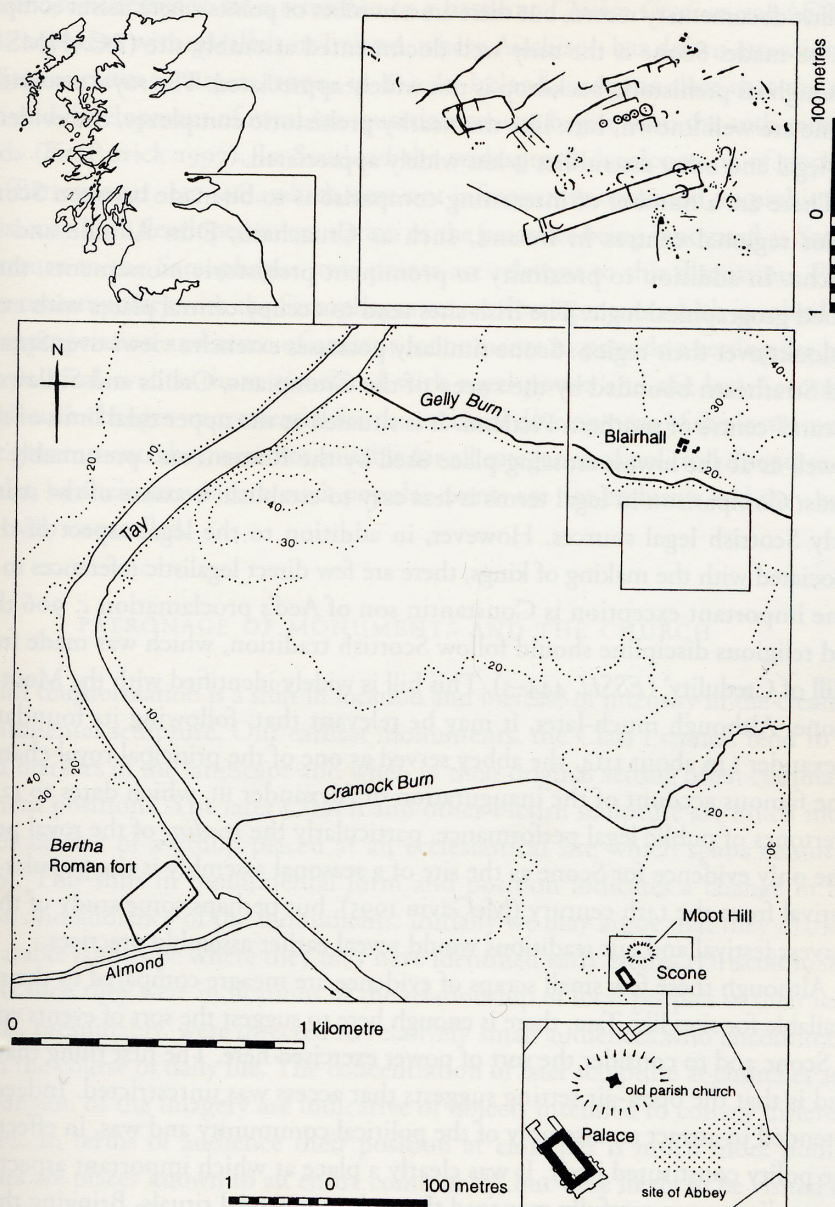


Fig. 50: Select prehistoric and later features in the vicinity of Scone and Blairhall.

assemblies as accessible places where public 'governmental' business – inaugurations and legal matters – could be conducted in the open.

The comparable Scottish archaeological evidence is supported by a much less explicit documentary record, but there are a number of points where useful comparisons can be made. Scone is the only well documented assembly site (RCAHMS 1994), although its prehistoric backdrop is not widely appreciated. The royal associations at Scone are well known, but, like the nearby prehistoric complexes, the evidence for the legal and other assemblies is less widely appreciated.

There are a number of interesting comparisons to be made between Scone and major regional centres in Ireland, such as Cruachain, Dún Ailinne and Emain Macha. In addition to proximity to prominent prehistoric monuments, there is a shared geographical logic. The Irish sites tend to occupy central places with extensive outlooks over their region. Scone similarly possesses extensive views over Strathmore and Strathearn bounded by the sweep of the Grampians, Ochils and Sidlaws in the 'natural' centre of southern Pictland. It is situated at the upper tidal limit of the Tay, as well as at the lowest crossing place used by the Roman, and presumably earlier, roads. Comparison in legal terms is less easy to establish, because of the scarcity of early Scottish legal sources. However, in addition to the legal aspect of the rites associated with the making of kings, there are few direct legalistic references to Scone. One important exception is Constantin son of Aed's proclamation *c.* 906 that law and religious discipline should follow Scottish tradition, which was made from the 'Hill of Credulity' (*ESSH*, 444–5). This hill is widely identified with the Moot Hill of Scone. Although much later, it may be relevant that, following its foundation by Alexander I in about 1114, the abbey served as one of the principal royal chanceries. The famous account of the inauguration of Alexander III, which dates to 1249, has overtones of public legal performance, particularly the *reading* of the royal pedigree. The only evidence for Scone as the site of a seasonal assembly is the popular harvest festival from the 14th century (McGavin 1995), but perhaps some study of the Perth harvest festival and fair traditions would reveal earlier assembly practices.

Although these few small scraps of evidence are meagre compared to the material available for sites like Tara, there is enough here to suggest the sort of events convened at Scone and to consider the sort of power exercised here. The first thing that can be said is that the open-air setting suggests that access was unrestricted. Indeed it was intended to attract an assembly of the political community and was, in effect, where the polity constituted itself. It was clearly a place at which important aspects of the proceedings were carefully managed through ceremonial rituals. Bringing these two ideas together we can suggest that Scone developed into the leading popular court in Southern Pictland. The setting also suggests that there were limitations on the kinds of public business which might be conducted there. An outdoors setting suits large-scale royal performances and proclamations involving crowds, but until the construction of the abbey Scone probably did not provide an appropriate setting for exclusive councils and intimate conferences.

Although the monuments which provided the backdrop for these assemblies were ancient, their adoption as the settings for legal courts and formal meetings appears to be an innovation of the 8th or 9th centuries (Driscoll 1998). The earliest historical notice of Scone seems to be a reference to a battle at *Caislen Credi* in 728 (*ESSH*, 223–4),² an event with parallels in Ireland, where Aitchison has drawn attention to royal sites as military targets (1994, 59–61). In Ireland, it seems clear that the real growth and development of royal inauguration centres began from the 10th century onwards (FitzPatrick 1997). In Scotland the widespread development of popular courts (Barrow 1992, 217–46), which were not infrequently convened on prehistoric barrows, may have developed in emulation of the practices being innovated at Scone.

To return to the Sarcophagus, two points are relevant to this discussion. First, roughly contemporary with the Sarcophagus we see developments which involved the active appropriation and reuse of ancient monuments to provide a setting for particular political events: those associated with royal power and the law. Secondly, although such changes were essential for the eventual development of the instruments of state government, they were not suitable for all categories of political discourse. In particular, by their very nature, such popular events are not exclusive and they were not so easily controlled.

PATRONAGE OF MONUMENTS AND THE CHURCH

The third transformation is a shift in location and increase of intensity in the creation of monumental sculpture. Our earliest monuments, the Class I stones, tend to be isolated markers in the landscape and when in their original setting often command prominent positions. The later Class II and other Pictish sculpture are much more likely to be one of a group placed at an ecclesiastical site which spans centuries (*ECMS*). This shift in monumental form and position indicates a change in the function and audience of the monuments. Initially we may argue that they marked out an arable landscape where they may have identified early estates (Driscoll 1988b; 1991). As such they were indications of the relationship of local peoples to their land and thus, presumably, were directed to relatively small audiences who encountered them in the course of daily life. The concentration of later sculpture at churches and the expansion of the imagery are indicative of objects intended to convey different messages. In terms of audience their position at churches is much more public. Churches are places known to an entire community, but were likely to be visited on religious occasions. They are also places which depend upon patronage to prosper, so can be assumed to have depended on the local potentates for some support. The

² The earliest indication of a royal residence near Scone are the references to *Rathinveramon*, where two kings died during the 9th–10th centuries (Anderson, M.O. 1980, 274–5) and which has been tentatively identified with the site of the Roman fort of Bertha (Fig. 50).

strength of this relationship with the local aristocracy can perhaps be inferred from the frequent representations of secular figures (see for example Figs 20, 22, 36, 38).

Although we have the sculpture, I think we must assume that it was the church which was the real place of interest, which the sculpture enhanced. We know of the form of none of these churches, but to judge from most early British and Irish churches, Pictish churches would have been small (no larger than 10–20 m by 3–7 m) wooden buildings.³ Once we recognise this, we have to reconsider the nature of the audience. Although public, access to the church was almost necessarily restricted at events which had potential political significance, such as marriages, christenings and funerals (Driscoll forthcoming). In such circumstances, and perhaps at the times of major religious feasts, there would have been an elite audience consisting of other potential patrons towards whom these monuments were addressed. It is hard to escape the feeling that such sculpture was more enthusiastic about religious themes than proclaiming the strength and vitality of the secular elite.

The Dupplin cross is perhaps our clearest example of the interconnection of religious and political discourses in this period. The original setting is likely to have been in and around Forteviot, where it is apparent there was a major church in the 9th century. The recently recognised inscription commemorating Custantin filius Fircus (Constantin son of Fergus, 789–820), links this monument to the ruler of southern Pictland in the decades around 800 (Forsyth 1995, 242). Whether or not it was put



Fig. 51: Arch from Forteviot, Perthshire. 9th century.

³ There is limited evidence for masonry architecture in Pictland in the form of architectural sculpture and stone furnishings (see p. 00; Ritchie 1995, 5–7).

up by him or to commemorate him, the cross is evidence of explicitly political images being married to religious imagery. The tradition which identifies Constantin as the founder of Dunkeld, if genuine, suggests that he appreciated the political value of supporting religious establishments (Bannerman 1993). As if to underscore the centrality of royal involvement with the promotion of churches, there is the Forteviot arch (Fig. 51) which is the most impressive fragment of Pictish architectural masonry. Not only does this arch indicate the existence of a stone church at Forteviot, the sculpture may represent Constantin's successor, his brother Oengus son of Fergus (820–34) who was associated with the foundation legend of St Andrews (see pp 80–81; *ESSH*, 266–7; Alcock 1982).

Interest in monumental patronage shifted away from fairly simple, locally important obelisks to sophisticated sculptured crosses and churches themselves. Royal patronage of churches thus emerges as an important characteristic of the 8th and 9th centuries (Clancy 1996). There can be little doubt that this was a growth area by the late 8th century. Most of the churches blessed with quantities of sculpture have strong claims to royal patronage: Abernethy, Meigle (Ritchie 1995), St Vigean, Dunkeld and, of course, St Andrews. Unfortunately, because of the large gap between age of the sculpture and the earliest surviving church fabric or documentary references, there has been a tendency to overlook the church *buildings* as the focus of attention. Despite the lack of surviving structures, we should place the buildings in the forefront of our mind.

The notion of finely decorated churches returns us to the Sarcophagus. Whether it was intended as a reliquary-shrine or a prestigious tomb, it was intended to be a conspicuous internal feature or a church, or perhaps a royal mausoleum. Isabel Henderson's discussion of the iconographical programme provides a reading which draws out the subtlety of the royal allusions (pp 105–18). For these messages to be fully recognised presupposes an educated, culturally-informed audience. If we assume that the Sarcophagus was placed in a prestigious position deep within the sacred precinct, this would have been a relatively exclusive audience. Its royal messages, if the current readings are correct, are ideologically much more sophisticated than the straightforward 'power and glory' programmes of the Aberlemno crosses. Because the Sarcophagus was intended for a church, it was possible to position the secular figures within the biblical narrative, so that the king becomes part of the scenery of the liturgy. One can imagine that this would be particularly effective at those moments when processions moved past or around the monument, but this could be appreciated by only a few.⁴

4 Although the contents of the Sarcophagus would have been extremely precious, this does not mean that they were the object of popular veneration. Apart from in Anglo-Saxon England there has been little systematic examination of the relationship between relics and pilgrimage in the early medieval period. Rollason can find little evidence of encouragement of popular pilgrimage (1989, 103–4). Prior to the development of the major saintly cults in the 12th century, interest in relics seems to have been directed towards an audience composed of ecclesiastics and the noble and royal classes.

In this third trend, it is possible to see the development of a particular political discourse which was highly ecclesiastical and possibly dominated by religious concerns. The secular influence in the sculpture could be even said to be constrained. All of which points to a much more oblique approach to the exercise of power, an approach which could be said to be directed towards an audience composed of clergy and the court, if that is not an anachronistic term.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF COMPLEMENTARY ROYAL DISCOURSES

By drawing attention to these three long term trends in the archaeological record I hope to highlight how the ideological effort directed towards differing audiences with differing intentions is related to the larger project of establishing a medieval State in southern Pictland. The emergence of the political entity known as Alba at the end of the 9th century can be seen in this respect as the outcome of the development of these three complementary forms of political discourse. Until recently, little historical significance was attached to the name 'Alba' (Broun 1994b), and there remains an air of mystery as to how such a stable entity was constructed. If we look at the settings, the audiences and the content of the social interactions, we can identify three distinct discourses, which contributed to ruling the kingdom. My suggestion is that in the three areas of social and political life there were conscious attempts to establish authoritative modes of expression and action through which relationships of power were constructed and the kingdom was governed.

The first of the three areas is the most grounded in archaeological excavation and survey, even if we only have a grasp on the hillfort stage. Clearly the shift in the architectural form and the landscape setting of the residences of the most powerful had an influence on the nature of the business that was conducted at these places and on the nature of lordship from local to national level. I think we must assume that the lord's hall remained the most influential arena for local politics, where the essential power base of kin and clients was constructed. I imagine that this powerbase would predominantly have been drawn from the immediate district. The focus of interaction would have concerned the maintenance of relations of lordship, which were mediated through the tenure of land and the payment of tribute. It seems reasonable to suggest that the systems of power which were developed in the 8th and 9th-century at places like Forteviot underpinned the later system of thanages, which were the main method of tapping into the wealth of the agricultural system in a non-monetary economy (Driscoll 1991; Grant 1993). The presence of architectural sculpture at Forteviot suggests a conscious distancing from the craggy hillfort and seems to assert that from the 9th century such royal residences should be thought of as palaces. This is a topic which can only be illuminated further by excavation.

The audience and settings of the open air popular assemblies, exemplified by Scone, were necessarily theatrical, employing broad gesture and conventional content.

The audience for a royal inauguration might be expected to come from well beyond the candidate's immediate constituency and the content of the performances presumably self-consciously drew upon a store of tradition. Despite their formality the business of these assemblies went right to the heart of royal authority. These gatherings of the 'community of the realm', to borrow Geoffrey Barrow's phrase (1981, 124–5), addressed issues of royal legitimacy in terms of nobility, prosperity and as leader of men. If these sites also served as popular courts, then we can see the ancient gathering places as being at the conceptual centres for government under the rule of law. While they may have brought together the leadership of the kingdom along with its populace, they were not exclusive gathering places. Moreover until the inauguration of David I the church seems only marginally involved in the Scone rites. For meetings of the elite, which included the ecclesiastical leadership, one needed to go to church.

The Christian strand to the political discourse took place in the most complex and exclusive architectural environment available, constructed in a distinctly European manner, a manner which probably encouraged the move away from the hillforts. Although this environment was governed by liturgical purpose, it was highly attractive to secular rulers as has been recently documented (Hudson 1994b). Those who accompanied the king to St Andrews or Dunkeld for Easter or a wedding are likely to have included the most trusted circle of advisors, the most powerful members of the nobility as well as clerics. In short, the social and political elite. Religious establishments may have been especially attractive gathering places for abbots and earls because they were to some extent neutral and distant from the nuts and bolts of personal lordship. Again, it seems worth raising the question should such elite gatherings be considered to represent a royal court? Certainly important decisions would have been taken in consultation with the gathered elite, but it would be some time before there was evidence of active government in the form of surviving documents.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SARCOPHAGUS

To return to the historical significance of the Sarcophagus, it seems certain that it was commissioned as a reminder of a specific king's relationship with St Andrews. It must have also been intended to sanctify royal authority in general, but it played a part in only one of the three political discourse outlined here. It can have had no direct relationship to either construction of local ties of lordship which focused on the hall or to the public ceremonies of kingship. Its significance is firmly anchored in the royal ecclesiastical sphere, which was the furthest reaching, the most selective and, politically, the most innovative. As we have seen each of the three discourses exhibited a concern for distinct political issues and involved distinct social groups. The audience for which the Sarcophagus was created was a small group composed of clerics, sponsored by the king, and a secular elite, selected by the king. The key to its importance was in this composition.

In addressing an elite and educated audience, the creator of the Sarcophagus was addressing a newly constituted group. This national aristocracy extended beyond the local powerbase of kin and friends that might crowd into a lordly hall, and was much more selective than the throng which came to Scone. Those who came into contact with the Sarcophagus were either devoted ecclesiastics or hand-picked representatives of the great regional lordships, which were subject by this time to the king of Fortrenn. The Sarcophagus can thus be read as marking an important step on the road to statehood, since it implies the presence of an elite leadership whose authority did not depend entirely on local bonds of lordship, but rather stemmed from institutional offices, such as mormaer and abbot, who were subject to royal approval. The demise of rule based exclusively on real or fictive kinship is, of course, one of the hallmarks of the emerging State and in that sense the ability to detect its embryonic presence is certainly historically significant.